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ABSTRACT

Although the benefits of sex education are often questioned, numerous studies have shown that the more knowledgeable a person is about sexuality, the less likely he or she is to engage in early sexual activities. To compare the differences in sexual knowledge, attitudes, and contraceptive choice between those adolescents who talk to their parents about sexuality and those who do not, 13 female and 11 male adolescents, aged 12 to 14, and their parents completed the Miller-Fisk Sexual Knowledge Test and Calderwood's Sexual Checklist. The results showed that amount of communication seemed to have had no effect on the children's sexual knowledge scores, but that those children who discussed sexuality frequently with their parents had attitudes toward sexuality that highly correlated with those of their parents. This finding may help to explain why children who can talk to their parents about sexuality tend to be more responsible for their behavior. (Author/JAC)

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Parent-child Communication and Adolescents' Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes

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Abstract

Twenty-four adolescents, ages 12 to 14 and at least one of their parents completed a sexual knowledge questionnaire and a sexual attitude checklist. The parents reported on the extent of communication about sex that they had had with their child. Amount of communication seems to have had no effect on the children's sexual knowledge scores, but those children who discussed sex frequently with parents had attitudes toward sex that were highly correlated (.76) with those of their parents. It appears that parents who communicate often with their children about sex are likely to have children whose sexual attitudes reflect their own values.

Parent-child communication and adolescents' sexual knowledge and attitudes

Research on adolescent sexuality and sex education has often yielded contradictory and confusing findings. Despite the many discrepancies in results and the methodological difficulties, however, there is no doubt that adolescents are having sex at an earlier age than in past decades (Hopkins, 1977), and the extent of premarital intercourse is also increasing (Zelnick & Kantner, 1972). This increase in sexual behavior is in itself not necessarily a problem, but sexual intercourse does have its consequences. The Alan Guttmacher Institute (1981) predicts that if there is no change in the current pregnancy rates, four out of ten girls who are now 14 will become pregnant during their teenage years. Zelnick and Kantner (1974) found that 64% of the premarital first pregnancies in their study were unintended, but only 13% to 16% of these mothers had been using regular contraception.

Although the benefits of sex education are often questioned, numerous studies have shown that the more knowledgeable a person is about sexuality, the less likely he or she is to engage in early sexual intercourse or intercourse without contraceptive protection (Kantner & Zelnick, 1972; Lewis, 1973; Miller & Simon, 1974; Shah, Zelnick & Kantner, 1975). Studies testing the effectiveness of a school based sex education have yielded inconsistent results (Evans, Selstad & Welcher, 1976; Finkel & Finkel, 1975; Goldsmith, Gabrielson, Gabrielson, Mathews & Potts, 1972; Monge, Dusek & Lawless, 1977; Reichert & Werley, 1975; Zelnick & Kantner, 1977).

Gordon, Scales, and Everly (1979) have concluded that "it may be unrealistic to expect the same school that cannot effectively teach reading to effectively teach sex education" (p. 174).

Spanier (1976) investigated how the sexual socializing experiences of childhood and adolescence influence the nature and extent of subsequent sexual behavior during college. He found that sex education received in school does not significantly affect reported premarital sexual activity. Informal influences (friends, family, mass media) explain much more of the variance in sexual experience. Spanier suggests that in addition to substantive content, there is a non-substantive attitudinal dimension which affects subsequent behavior. Therefore, the source of sex information becomes an important variable.

Lewis (1973) has found that when parents are the main source of sex education, the children tend to engage in less premarital sexual activity. For female children, the wider the range of sexual topics discussed by the parent, the less likely they are to have premarital coital experience or to be promiscuous. Spanier (1977) found that females who have received most of their sex education from their mothers are significantly less sexually active. Furstenberg (1971) found that girls from families in which birth control was discussed by the mother were more than twice as likely to have used some method of contraception.

It was the purpose of the following study to try to quantify some of the differences in sexual knowledge, attitudes, and contraceptive choice between those adolescents who have frequent discussion with their parents about sex and those who do not. Young adolescents, ages 12 to 14 were chosen as the target population, since very few studies of sex education have been done with this age group. This is the age at which many schools begin to offer some sex education, and by age 14, 18% of the boys and 6% of the girls have had sexual intercourse (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1981).

It was predicted that those children who have had a relatively large amount of discussion with their parents about sex (high communication group) would score higher on a sexual knowledge test and choose more effective methods of birth control than those children who did not often discuss sex with their parents (low communication group). In addition, it was expected that there would be a high positive correlation between the sexual knowledge scores of parents and children in the high communication group as well as between the sexual attitude scores of these parents and children.

Method

Subjects. The research participants were 13 female and 11 male adolescents, ages 12 to 14 and one or both of their parents. Participating families were recruited from church, school, and community groups as well as through a newspaper advertisement.

Questionnaires. To test sexual knowledge, the 24-item version of the Miller-Fisk sexual knowledge test (Gough, 1974) was used. Calderwood's sexual attitude checklist (1971) was used to assess attitudes. Adolescent subjects were given a questionnaire to determine their previous sex education and their contraceptive choice. This questionnaire contained no questions about actual behavior. Instead, the teenagers were simply asked to pretend that they had to choose a birth control method. The parents were given an additional questionnaire which asked questions about their education, religion, church attendance, occupation, marital status, and the extent to which they had talked to their child about sex. The questionnaire also contains a checklist of 12 topics which parents may have discussed with their children (menstruation, pregnancy, venereal disease, abortion, etc.). Parents were simply asked to indicate which topics they had actually talked to their children about.

Procedure. Parents and/ or children were informed about the study either in person or over the telephone. Interested families were given a packet of the questionnaires with instructions to be followed if they decided to participate in the study. The families were told to complete the questionnaires at home and return them via a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Results

Using the parents' self-reports, a score was assigned to each parent set indicating how much they had discussed sex with their child. Parents who scored 50% of the possible points or above were assigned to the high communication group. Parents who scored 49% or below were

assigned to the low communication group.

Out of a possible 24 points, the mean score on the sexual knowledge test for the children in the high communication group was 14.73, and the mean score for the children in the low communication group was 13.9. A t-test indicated that this difference is not significant. The mean score on the sexual knowledge test for the parents in the high communication group was 19.55, and for the parents in the low communication group, the mean was 17.3. This difference is not significant. Pearson correlations were found for parents' and children's scores in each group. For the high communication group, $r = -.14$, and for the low communication group, $r = .08$. Neither of these correlation coefficients are significant.

Out of a possible 69 points, the mean score on the sexual attitude checklist for the children in the high communication group was 51.3, and the mean score for the children in the low communication group was 50.2. This difference is not significant. The mean score on the attitude checklist for the parents in the high communication group was 53.8, and the mean score for parents in the low communication group was 53.2. Again, this difference is not significant. For the high communication families, $r = .76$, $p < .01$ for the attitude scores of the parents and children. For the low communication group, the correlation between parents' and childrens' attitudes scores is $r = .58$, $p < .01$. A Fisher's r to z transformation indicates that the difference between these two correlation coefficients is significant ($z = 1.37$, $p < .01$).

All but three of the adolescents chose an effective means of birth control (pill or condom). The three who said they would not use birth control were all in the low communication group.

Discussion

It is evident from the results that, at least among the population sampled, the amount of communication between parent and child about sex does not seem to make much of a difference on the child's score on a sexual knowledge test. Perhaps the type of knowledge transmitted from parent to child is not the type measured by the Miller-Fisk test. Parent-child communication does seem to make a great deal of difference, however, when it comes to the child's sexual attitudes. Although the parents in both groups had almost identical mean scores on the attitude checklist, the correlation between parents' and childs' sexual attitudes was quite high for the high communication group. Liberal parents tended to have liberal children and not-so-liberal parents tended to have not-so-liberal children. Parents who did not communicate as much with their children about sex had children whose attitudes did not ressemble their own as closely.

The findings of this study should be encouraging to those parents who wish to transmit their sexual values to their children. The key to the positive benefits of open parent-child communication about sex may not be in the content of that communication as much as in the attitudes conveyed by the parent. This finding helps explain why children who can talk to their parents about sex are less promiscuous and more responsible when they do engage in sexual activity. Their behavior is simply reflecting the values of their parents.

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